

Greater Newark HUD Tenants Coalition

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IV. TECHNIQUES FOR INCREASING PARTICIPATION

Why do People Participate?

People join neighborhood associations for different reasons and to get different kinds of benefits. Ask yourself if your association provides the benefits that members want. Some people participate because of particular issues which interest them. Others participate for personal or social reasons or a combination of all three. Your leadership style and the "climate" of the organization can also influence how often people participate in your organization. Do not expect everyone to always participate. The important thing is to leave the door wide open for member participation by asking for member ideas and input. The association should not be a one woman show. Demonstrate understanding for people's concerns – family problems, crowded schedules and worries about how much things cost. Try to keep dues manageable and ask people to share costs as much as possible. Recognizing and addressing the concerns of members, will go a long way towards maintaining healthy participation.

There are several key areas where changing the way you work and using some of these suggested techniques can increase the participation in your organization.

Organizational Issues

Many people first join a neighborhood association because they are concerned about a particular issue such as drugs or vandalism. If your group is not addressing a particular issue or is not addressing it actively, such members may stop participating. Also, the times your meetings get scheduled, the place and the frequency may be a factor in low participation. Try some of the following techniques:

1. Surveys can help make sure that the organization is really representing the members:
 - A. Conduct a survey of your members to see what issues are the most important to them, what skills and talents they have that can be useful to your organization, and the best day and time for meetings.
 - B. The survey should be put together by a group and should be distributed door-to-door.

- C. Publicize the results of the survey.
 - D. Conduct a survey periodically, say every two years or so, because neighborhoods and people change.
- II. Effective meetings will keep people involved. The opposite will cause people to drop out.
- A. Every effort should be made to have meetings start and end on time.
 - B. Agendas should be prepared and distributed in advance.
 - C. Be clear about who should be there. Bored members do not stay involved.
 - D. Don't hold unnecessary meetings.
- III. Convenient meeting time and location will make it more likely that people will attend:
- A. Include a question on the survey about location and time of meetings.
 - B. If people are afraid to go to meetings alone, use an escort system of adults and teenagers.
- IV. Childcare may be needed by some people in order to attend meetings:
- A. Use the survey to determine if people need childcare during the meetings.
 - B. Try hiring responsible youth in your community to be childcare helpers during the meetings.
- V. Visible activities make member feel that the organization is accomplishing things and moving ahead:
- A. Publicize the group's activities and achievements, from the biggest to the smallest, in a newsletter.
 - B. Examples of concrete and visible activities include block parties, street cleanups and pot luck dinners.

Benefits and "Climate"

Personal benefits are a great incentive for members to remain active in the association. This means many things including gaining new skills, being rewarded for work well done

and having a chance to gain leadership positions. The following are some techniques to use to make sure personal benefits are a part of your organization.

- I. Social time and social activities build a greater sense of community. In fact, that is one of the key reasons why people join neighborhood groups. All work and no play make for a dull organization:
 - A. Be sure to schedule social time at some point in your meeting. Most groups do it at the beginning or the end of the meetings.
 - B. Members can buy, make or bring refreshments to the meetings.
 - C. Social events include block parties, dances, dinners and bus rides to Atlantic City.
 - D. Form a Social/fundraising Committee to plan these activities on a regular basis.
- II. Sharing resources and information with members is a concrete way that an organization can be useful to its members.
 - A. Publish lists in your newsletter of important phone numbers, organizations and events that will be of interest to people.
 - B. Distribute these lists at your meetings, as well.
 - C. Invite speakers to your meetings from different agencies and organizations to speak on topics of interests to members.
- III. Providing direct benefits and services to members builds their commitment to the organization. Examples include:
 - A. Bulk purchase programs, such as food buying clubs. Arrange for discounts for members at local stores.
 - B. Food or other cooperatives.
 - C. Arranging for contractors to provide home improvement or other services to members at a reduced fee.
- IV. Development of new leaders will avoid burn out of present leaders and will encourage members to get more involved.
 - A. Use a "buddy system" where current leaders work closely with new or potential leaders to pass on skills, knowledge and contacts.

- B. Find out about training workshops that would be helpful to new leaders from community organizations and colleges and urge them to attend.
- C. When giving out work to new leaders, assign one task at a time; evaluate at the completion of each task; make suggestions and criticisms in private; praise an individuals effort in public.

Leaders and Leadership

How often have you felt discouraged because of low member turn-out at a meeting? How many times have you heard a neighbor say, "I'm too busy at my job to take on extra work." Or, "What can I do? I can't leave the house". Both leaders and members have expectations which can lead to problems and lack of participation.

A crucial step on the road to organization stability is learning to set realistic expectations. Leaders need to realize that every task does not demand the same level of participation. Members should not only be encouraged to feel comfortable with the idea that everyone does not need to participate in the same way, but they should be assured that their contributions are valuable, even if the only contribution they can make is calling a hardware store or xeroxing a flyer at the office.

As a leader, here are some ideas and techniques you can consider and put into practice to increase the participation in your organization.

- I. Setting realistic expectations will cut down on frustration and resentment among members:
 - A. You may not need large turn-outs at every meeting. Set goals for attendance and participation based on work that needs to get done.
 - B. Do not focus on what you consider poor attendance. Concentrate on coming up with techniques to increase attendance.
 - C. Establish a Membership Committee whose job it will be to develop plans for recruiting new members.
 - D. Be realistic about what people can do, given the other responsibilities in their lives. Respect all contributions, no matter how small.
- II. Planning ahead makes your organization more efficient and more able to fulfill its purpose.
 - A. Have yearly planning meetings devoted entirely to setting goals and objectives for the year.

- B. The leadership body should monitor the process over the year to see if the goals are being met.
- C. Evaluation meetings should be scheduled after a project or activity is completed to discuss how it went and what should be changed.

III. Show appreciation for work well done. This encourages people to continue to work with the organization:

- A. Have a special column in your newsletter devoted to publicizing people's efforts.
- B. Give out certificates or awards at meetings or fundraising dinners.
- C. Praise people in private as well as in public situations.

IV. Delegating "real" work to people helps them develop skills and confidence. It also helps present leaders avoid getting burnt out.

- A. Break a job down into concrete tasks; don't leave it general. Follow-up after a task is assigned.
- B. Let people carry out a task differently than how you might do it. Allow for mistakes. It is part of learning.
- C. Check yourself: guide, but do not interfere.
- D. Don't set people up to fail. Make sure they have the ability to carry out the job.

V. Being open to criticism may be one of the more difficult skills for leaders to acquire. Members need to feel that they can criticize their organization without being attacked:

- A. When someone criticizes your leadership, take a mental step backwards and do not take it personally.
- B. Periodically, the members of the leadership body should give feedback to one another on their styles of leadership.